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GERDY TROOST

Hitler’s Other Chosen Architect

On May 2, 1945, Germans awoke to the news that their beloved Führer had “fallen” in the war and that they would face their enemies without him. The next day, Gerdy Troost took to her bed and remained there for a week.1 Troost had been among Hitler’s most idealistic and longest-serving artistic collaborators, working with him from 1930 until the end of the war. She was also among his most loyal, refusing to renounce him even when confronted by a postwar denazification tribunal that would punish her not only for her past deeds, but also for her intransigency and pride. And yet in many ways, she was an unlikely partner, not fitting the image of the members of Hitler’s inner circle, by virtue not only of her gender, but also of her fiercely independent temperament and sometimes contrary beliefs, which she rarely kept to herself.

The woman born in Stuttgart on March 3, 1904, as Sophie Gerhardine Wilhelmine Andresen might never have encountered Hitler if it were not for her relationship with Paul Troost, whom she met in her father’s atelier in 1923 (fig. 36). Johannes Andresen, an interior decorator, was the owner and director of the German Woodcraft Studios (Deutsche Holzkunstwerkstätten) in Bremen, which produced Paul Troost’s interiors designs for the North German Lloyd Sierra steamships. Gerdy Andresen worked with her father in an unknown capacity after having completed her education at the age of sixteen at a higher girls’ school in Düsseldorf. In 1924, she moved to Munich—where Troost lived—ostensibly to study architecture and art history. She did not enroll in the university, for which she (like many other women at the time) did not have the necessary qualifications, but instead audited courses and took drawing lessons.2 On August 5, 1925, the twenty-one-year-old married Troost, two weeks shy of his forty-seventh birthday, and from this period dated her collaboration with him, first on his ship interiors and later on his National Socialist commissions. The couple made annual study tours within Europe, including to Italy and France, and also traveled to the United States, where North German Lloyd sent Paul Troost in 1926 to familiarize himself with the latest technological and design developments, in order to satisfy the demands for greater comfort among its passengers, many of whom were American. The itinerary included hotels and housing developments in Atlantic City, Buffalo, Chicago, Niagara Falls, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., the Ford factory in Detroit, and ships at anchor in New York Harbor.3 After Paul Troost’s death, his widow—while fiercely protective of his legacy—nonetheless insisted on their having shared a true artistic partnership from 1925 to 1934. In a letter written as the first anniversary of his death approached, she recalled, “We had no children, no, but were nonetheless truly life partners. We lived so intensely and consciously together in the realm of architecture, art, and music. And, again, in our common pursuit of a lofty ideal, which in recent years was our whole life. We shared our days from morning until night, starting at 6:00 <sc>a.m.</sc> with drawing pencil and pad at breakfast and ending evenings with debates about the politics of art. There was hardly a thought of my own that I did not share with him.”4

The “lofty ideal” to which Gerdy and Paul Troost dedicated their artistic efforts and that brought them together as a couple also united them with their most important patron: Hitler. All three conceived of the arts as a sacred duty and mission. Each revered the classical tradition and rejected the “concrete Zeitgeist” of international modernism, although Gerdy Troost, belonging to a younger generation, was more open than the two men to contemporary design and artistic trends. Hitler believed Paul Troost was the master capable of giving architectural form to the spirit of his nationalist revolution, and Paul Troost believed that he had found a devoted patron who shared his deepest values and ambitions.5 Thus, the three were joined not only by their common pursuit of an ideal, but also by their recognition that they needed each other for its attainment.

And yet, the partnership among them was not inevitable. In an unpublished postwar reminiscence about the couple’s first encounters with Hitler, Gerdy Troost recalled her husband’s initial reluctance to accept Elsa Bruckmann’s invitation to meet with the politician at her home on September 24, 1930. This hesitancy was rooted less in political differences than in Paul Troost’s antipathy to such social events. The couple lived quietly and Troost had little patience for such gatherings, which he considered a waste of time. Bruckmann, however, insisted, and Gerdy Troost, who did not attend the “gentlemen’s evening,” spent the hours playing Brahms on her piano and reading Cézanne’s letters, waiting for her husband to return. (The inclusion of this detail in her narrative reveals that she wanted to be understood as a highly cultivated woman, immersed in the world of music and art. It also mitigated her absence at the meeting, suggesting a connection through their mutual interests.) When he arrived home at 2:00 <sc>a.m.</sc>, he gushed enthusiastically about Hitler, whom he claimed bore little resemblance to the stern image on election posters, but instead proved to be an immensely sympathetic and knowledgeable lover of art and music, eager to recruit Troost for his ambitious architectural plans.6

Gerdy Troost reacted to her husband’s bedazzlement with skepticism, but was herself enchanted upon meeting Hitler on the afternoon of September 30, when he first visited the couple’s apartment. In a November 1930 letter to her mother, she wrote: “Contrary to the unappealing hue and cry and his public persona, Hitler in person and with Paulus behaves like a truly splendid, serious, cultivated, modest chap. Really touching. And with so much feeling and sensitivity for architecture—Paulus says that he has hardly ever met such a person in his life! Here in Munich he is, of course, the hero. Nonetheless, I am not very moved by his politics and views, in that I am first and above all and forever a human being and only then a German—in other words, a pacifist, and that contradicts his doctrine! But work with him is very pleasurable, because he is such an architecturally sensitive person—and so enthused about Paulus.”7 Her unpublished postwar text further reinforces this account of a strong attraction bridled somewhat by unease about Hitler’s politics. She recounted how, a short while after this afternoon visit, Hitler came to dinner: “He did not eat, he did not drink, he did not smoke, but he talked and talked.” He spoke about his grand architectural plans as well as his political vision for Germany. Near midnight, he left, and the couple stayed up late talking, unable to sleep for excitement, but also for concern about the meaning of “nationalism” in National Socialism, which, she claimed, jarred with their pacifistic and cosmopolitan worldview. Convincing themselves, however, of Hitler’s “genius” and his best intentions for Germany, they went to bed in the early morning hours, putting their anxieties to rest as well.8

Paul Troost’s professional situation at the time undoubtedly motivated the couple to trust in Hitler. After eighteen years of lucrative contracts for North German Lloyd, Troost’s commissions for designing ship interiors had come to an end by the summer of 1930. The worsening economic effects of the Depression had put the building of luxury ocean liners on hold indefinitely, giving Troost little hope of new work. He was also aware that the spread of international modernism in Germany had made his designs appear old-fashioned to some of his corporate patrons, perhaps damaging his chances of returning to prominence within the industry. When he met Hitler, Troost was spending his days painting.9 While his Lloyd contracts had made him wealthy enough to retire comfortably, the fifty-two-year-old architect was no doubt drawn to the possibility that, rather than winding down, his career might be raised by this fanatical admirer to unimagined new heights, encompassing not only monumental building, but also urban planning.

And, indeed, by hitching his talent to Hitler’s star, Troost found himself inundated with plum projects, especially after 1933, while other architects joined Germany’s long unemployment lines. Following the Brown House interiors, Troost received numerous prestigious commissions from Hitler, including for the Führerbau and <sc>NSDAP</sc> Administrative Building, House of German Art, redesign of the Königsplatz, and Temples of Honor, all in Munich, as well as for the renovation of the Chancellery in Berlin. He also undertook projects for Julius Streicher, Adolf Wagner, Franz Ritter von Epp, and other prominent figures in the Nazi movement. Troost could hardly keep up with the work, and at the time of his death, in January 1934, most of these projects remained in the planning stages. He might well have remained a footnote in Third Reich history if his widow had not made it her life’s mission to complete his buildings and thereby secure his place in the National Socialist pantheon.

Gerdy Troost and Hitler first established a working relationship through her involvement in her husband’s projects. This encompassed, from the little we know, consulting on designs, particularly in the selection of colors and fabrics, and helping to manage the office. In his memoirs, Julius Schaub, Hitler’s adjutant, claimed that “she inspired her husband in many of his designs” and that her influence extended not only to Paul Troost’s ideas, but also to those of Hitler.10 According to Gerdy Troost, Hitler was a thoroughly engaged client, showing an enthusiastic interest in even the smallest detail. Before and after coming to power, he visited the Troosts regularly, sometimes as often as once a week. Indeed, once he became chancellor, the Troosts’ studio was often his first stop upon his return to Munich. Gerdy Troost claimed that, except for the “gentlemen’s evening” when Paul Troost had been introduced to Hitler, she had been present at all subsequent meetings, a fact confirmed by Schaub.11 On April 13, 1933, Gerdy Troost met for the first time alone with Hitler when the two visited the atelier of the sculptor carrying out Paul Troost’s design for the memorial to the sixteen Nazis killed in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, which Hitler had commissioned for the south side of the Feldherrnhalle, a nineteenth-century military monument on the Odeonsplatz in Munich. Inaugurated on November 9, 1933, with a dramatic recreation of the putsch march, the memorial would become a sacred site for Nazi followers.

The day after her solo meeting with Hitler, Troost described the experience in a long letter to her friend Alice Hess, thereby revealing how her initial skepticism had by then transformed into utter devotion. Hitler, she said, was “animated, fresh as ever, and enthused about the design.” Beaming at the memorial-in-progress, he said, “Yes, indeed, such proportions and such harmony, such internal and external form [Gestaltung], only a Troost is capable of this.” Hitler then began to talk about the Parthenon and the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, and Troost listened, spellbound. “And I have to say this again and again, because it grips me so forcefully every time, how these hours of looking and listening enrich and deepen me. This rousing vigor, this spiritedness, this enthralling, glorious warmth of Hitler’s. The intensity, power of thought, and compelling, masterful logic with which he always weighs, synthesizes, shapes, and solves a question, thought, theme, or problem, be it in a cultural, economic, political, or other domain. Yet he is never rigid, narrow, dry, or pontificating, like most academics and philosophers.”12 And so the letter continued, a torrent of words of praise for Hitler’s knowledge, manner of expression, and vision spilling down the page.

Troost grasped for lofty historical and religious parallels to adequately describe the effect of her encounters with the Führer: “Hours? Moments—eternities. They are filled with richness, profundity, wisdom, and religion. And to me it always seems as if a second Plato were creating a new conception of the world. As if Kant were once more arguing his critique of pure reason. And as if Meister Eckhart and Luther, with strong, devout hearts, once again heard the call of their God, and in defiance of the whole world, and despite all the dangers and demons, followed and served him.” Then turning her attention back to her friend, Troost acknowledged that “you are amazed that I repeat here once again what I have already told you so often.” Troost asked her to understand “that an overflowing heart does not allow the tongue and the pen to remain still.” But even with all that she had said, Troost wanted her friend to realize that it had not been and could never be enough. “One can well love and adore this unique human being, but never do justice to the true measure of his greatness and profundity. Only the future will be able to appreciate it. I am unspeakably happy and gratefully proud to be able to witness the actual hour of birth of the coming Weltanschauung and the coming faith.”13

Years later, when Troost would be called to testify before a denazification tribunal, her close relationship to Hitler would prompt questions about the dictator’s influence over women. On January 21, 1947, the tribunal chairman, a lawyer named Josef Schleifer, asked Troost, “Just what was it about the man that made women run after him, made them so crazy about him—what was it about the man, just tell me that.” (The question might have been prompted by a prominent feature in the Washington Post, written by Hitler’s doctor, Karl Brandt, and published two days earlier, that discussed Troost—described as highly intelligent, but charmless and cruel—as one of Hitler’s “legion of ladies” who had profited from as well as bolstered his power.14) Troost replied, “I do not know—he was so warm and kindhearted—and, by the way, men fell for him, too. No, I have not been in love with him.”15 But as her letter to Hess shows, Troost was besotted, if not by the man himself, then by the idea of the Great Genius—a Plato, Kant, and Luther, all rolled into one—who would usher in a new golden age for humankind, to which she and her husband would not only be witnesses, but in which they would also play a central role.

Hitler, in turn, revered Paul Troost, whom he considered the greatest architect to grace German soil since Karl Friedrich Schinkel. In claiming to have discovered and thereby rescued Troost’s genius late in his career, allowing the architect to realize his masterworks before he died, Hitler elevated himself to a modern-day Ludwig II, and Troost to his Richard Wagner.16 Like the king and the composer, Hitler saw his legacy intertwined with that of his architect. In a letter to Gerdy Troost, written from his military headquarters and dated January 21, 1944, the tenth anniversary of Troost’s death, Hitler stated, “What the professor once meant to me personally cannot be fathomed by someone who does not understand with what concern I awaited the realization of my artistic plans.” With the Russians driving the German army out of the Baltic states, and British and American forces fighting in Italy, Hitler perhaps reassured himself when he stated: “If the New Reich is to be more than a passing phenomenon, then, alongside its power politics, it must also have cultural values to leave to posterity. It is only through the art of building, however, that a political order can experience its most beautiful immortalization.” He continued, “I have always considered it a great good fortune that providence birthed your husband and allowed me to meet him.”17

In her postwar denazification testimony, Gerdy Troost stated that after Paul Troost’s death, Hitler “transferred his veneration for my husband to me.” According to Schaub, Hitler stated that “she is the only person who can continue the work of Professor Troost, because she is deeply rooted within it.”18 The surviving records from the Atelier Troost amply demonstrate Hitler’s support for her and her work. Asked in 1973 by Arizona artist Karen Kuykendall whether she had encountered difficulties as a professional woman in the Third Reich, Troost replied that while it “naturally” had not been easy for others in this “Männerstaat”—a term Heinrich Himmler had used to denote a manly men’s state, in which women and homosexuals would play no part—Hitler’s admiration had protected her.19 High-ranking Nazi officials, including Albert Speer, Joseph Goebbels, and Himmler, knew that Hitler held Troost in high regard and did their best to remain on good terms. When they did go head-to-head with her, they invariably lost.

But Hitler’s support, crucial as it was, was not the sole reason for her ability to hold her own in this Männerstaat. Gerdy Troost was not easily intimidated or deterred and had a clear mission to secure and protect her husband’s legacy. Schaub maintained that in the Atelier Troost “she set the tone on designs, especially on subtle color compositions, and made Hitler aware in particular of color harmonies.”20 There is evidence to support Schaub’s assertion in the business correspondence of the Berlin firm August Wagner, which provided the art glass for Paul Troost’s party buildings. Designs hinged on his widow’s approval, and when she was absent from a meeting, the decision process stalled. She also appears to have been the partner who was more difficult to please, as suggested by a letter from the Wagner firm to a third party, in which they complained about the “untold effort” it had taken to win her satisfaction.21

Rumors that circulated during and after the Third Reich implied a determination on Troost’s part to protect her husband’s legacy that went far beyond quality control of the design and construction of his projects. In his postwar memoirs, Otto Dietrich, Hitler’s press chief, blamed Troost for the demise of the Frankfurter Zeitung (Frankfurt Newspaper) in August 1943. At the time, the liberal paper, founded in 1856 and bought out in 1934 by I. G. Farben—the chemical concern that would later produce the deadly gas used in the concentration camps—had, for the sake of public relations abroad, remained protected and enjoyed an unusual degree of freedom. The newspaper reputedly provoked Troost’s ire when it printed an article critical of her husband’s architecture. She is said to have followed it closely thereafter, keeping a clipping file documenting the newspaper’s criticism of National Socialism. According to Dietrich, when Hitler learned about the newspaper’s abuse of its freedom from Troost over lunch at the Osteria Bavaria, one of his favorite Munich haunts, he ordered it shut down, over Goebbels’s and Dietrich’s protests. But the story is certainly more complicated than Dietrich suggested. The newspaper was already under attack by high-ranking party leaders, and Hitler himself detested it and considered it a Jewish holdout and enemy of the Reich. Moreover, by 1943, with few countries in Europe remaining unoccupied or neutral, the newspaper’s foreign propaganda value as an “objective” voice of the Reich was limited. Nonetheless, Troost’s protest seems to have catalyzed Hitler into action, prompting the paper’s demise.22

Troost was also accused of having obstructed or even ruined the careers of her husband’s architectural rivals. Speer wrote that she “lashed out” and “violently attacked” Paul Troost’s opponents, approaching “the defense of her husband’s work with a determination and sometimes a heatedness that made her much feared.”23 Friedelind Wagner, by contrast, suggested that Troost was motivated by jealousy of the newcomers who might replace her husband in Hitler’s heart: “This sinister woman,” she wrote in her memoirs, “managed to keep his memory green by prejudicing Hitler against everyone else whose work pleased him.”24

Wagner offered the example of Paul Schultze-Naumburg, an archly conservative architect who had led the fight against modernism in the 1920s. His views were vehemently racist, conflating a “diseased” modernism with mixed-race artists, and arguing for a “healthy” German architecture based on the “blood and soil” of its “northern” people. To his disappointment, when his ideal racist state was founded, Schultze-Naumburg received few government commissions; his political alliances alienated Goebbels, and Hitler did not care for his architecture, which he found provincial. According to Schultze-Naumburg, however, it was Gerdy Troost who caused an irreparable break between the architect and the dictator. In 1934, Hitler had commissioned Schultze-Naumburg to renovate the interior of the Nuremberg Opera House; it would prove to be his first and last project for the Führer. Shortly before the work was completed, Hitler, accompanied by Troost and other architects, toured the building. According to Schultze-Naumburg, the visit was proceeding well, with Hitler expressing delight at the renovation. (Others present disputed this, saying that Hitler was in a foul mood from the start.) But then Troost “began to whisper to him,” and when she was finished, Hitler erupted in a tirade of criticism, berating the architect in front of everyone. He ordered Schultze-Naumburg to share oversight of the construction with Troost, at which point the aggrieved architect withdrew from the project. After the humiliating encounter in Nuremberg, Schultze-Naumburg had little further contact with Hitler or the Nazi Party.25

In a 1962 letter from Winifred Wagner to her friend Gerdy Troost, Wagner mentioned that Lotte Schultze-Naumburg, the architect’s widow, was pressuring her for help and “keeps saying that YOU were responsible back then for her husband being fired!!!!” Schultze-Naumburg, in financial straits and with three children to support, had asked Wagner to confirm her story so that she could transform her husband from perpetrator into victim and thereby claim government entitlements. Troost replied that she had no idea why Frau Schultze-Naumburg would make such an “absurd” accusation and speculated that it was founded on an old grudge nursed by Paul Schultze-Naumburg against her husband’s success. Wagner responded that although she had never fully understood the issue, “I can only remember that the couple arrived here utterly devastated when, one summer, USA [Wagner’s shorthand for Unser Seliger Adolf, or “Our Blessed Adolf,” as she referred to Hitler in her correspondence] had inspected the remodeling or the interior furnishing of the Nuremberg Opera House, in the course of which a fierce disagreement broke out, for which the couple blamed YOU!”26

Troost let the matter rest there, but in a 1999 letter to historian Martha Schad, written when Troost was in her mid-nineties, she explained her side of the event. Hitler, she recalled, had requested her presence on the site visit. When he asked her opinion, she stated: “Very well renovated. What I found excessive was that Schultze-Naumburg had installed the swastika in very large—far too large—emblems in front of the box seats.” While Troost presented her actions as professional (even if one wonders whether the image of the racist Schultze-Naumburg and his gigantic swastikas has an element of ridicule in it), some historians have ascribed malicious intentions to them, stemming not from jealousy, as Friedelind Wagner suggested, but rather from revenge. In his memoirs, Hans F. K. Günther, a friend of Schultze-Naumburg, recalled that upon learning in 1934 that Troost planned to take over her husband’s atelier, Schultze-Naumburg disparaged her abilities by saying, “Oh please, I would not let a surgeon’s widow operate on my appendicitis.” Günther surmised that Schultze-Naumburg repeated the insult to others, and that the remark found its way to Troost, earning him her enmity.27

In the patronage system that Hitler created, resentments, gossip, and paranoia formed a routine part of artistic life, making it difficult to judge, in the absence of contemporary documentation, whether the postwar criticisms about Troost abusing her power represent legitimate grievances or lingering indignation at the power this woman had once exerted. Nonetheless, other sources amply demonstrate how carefully Troost controlled and protected her husband’s reputation after his death. In 1938, she published Building in the New Reich (Das Bauen im neuen Reich), which offered a comprehensive survey of Nazi-approved architecture in the new Germany. The lavishly illustrated volume featured party buildings, memorials, <sc>NSDAP</sc> schools, youth hostels, administrative and government buildings, barracks, theaters, stadiums, recreation and social facilities, factories and laboratories, highways and bridges, airports, community halls, agricultural buildings, and housing. The accompanying text attempted to unite this impressive range of buildings into a coherent ideological whole by repeating Nazi platitudes about the “organic” connection between buildings and a race’s “blood and soil”; the “nomadism” of foreign people in Germany, who were unable to find purchase on its soil; the bond of culture and blood between contemporary Germans and the ancient “Hellenes”; the damage wrought by liberalism, Marxism, Jews, and industrialism; the cultural bolshevism of the New Objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit); the subordination of technology to art; and the importance of architecture as the highest cultural expression of “an awakened, racially aware peoples.” Although Schultze-Naumburg was not among the architects represented, the influence of his racial theories is clearly discernible.28

The book opens with the work of Paul Troost, who is celebrated as the originating genius of the new German Weltanschauung in built form. The first image is of a Temple of Honor, and the dramatically photographed, stark neoclassical forms, together with the honor guard, graphically convey the sense of a new discipline. The Königsplatz, Führerbau, <sc>NSDAP</sc> Administrative Building, and House of German Art are also generously illustrated and discussed.29 The visual attention to Troost’s projects and their placement within the book reinforces the narrative of his foundational role for all subsequent National Socialist architecture. Gerdy Troost did not actually write the text herself, although she edited it carefully. She collaborated on the book with Kurt Trampler, an ardent nationalist who had previously published on the Germans’ need for and right to Lebensraum. He approached her about the project, offering to write the text and collect the images. Troost determined the thematic organization of the book, selected the architects who were to be included, chose the illustrations, and corrected the text. According to their agreement, she maintained full control over the text and images.30 The book that resulted, which appeared only under her name, profoundly shaped the conception of Third Reich architecture. It sold tens of thousands of copies and went through multiple editions (as well as being translated into Dutch after the German occupation of the Netherlands). In 1943, Troost published a second volume largely dedicated to the architecture of war, including military schools, flak towers, air bases, barracks, military hospitals, bomb shelters, and memorials. Two further volumes, on National Socialist interior design and furnishings, were planned but never completed.31

Building in the New Reich followed and reinforced Paul Troost’s glorification at the inaugural German Architecture and Applied Arts Exhibition, held at the House of German Art from January 28 to April 18, 1938. The architectural section dominated, occupying the ground-floor exhibition halls, while the applied arts displays were limited to the second floor. Each division of the exhibition had its own small jury, and Troost served on both. The architectural jury, which also included Leonhard Gall and Albert Speer, gave pride of place to Paul Troost’s work.32 The visitor entered the exhibition through a room devoted entirely to Paul Troost and featuring large-scale photographs and an architectural model of the party buildings on the Königsplatz. The only work not by Troost was a plaster relief of Pallas Athena by Munich sculptor Richard Klein, the symbol he had created for the House of German Art, which reinforced the classical heritage of Troost’s architecture. A huge model of Troost’s House of German Art was placed at the center of the second room, which included models and photographs of work by other architects. Dominant among the large-scale photographs were the Munich and Berlin projects of Gall and Gerdy Troost. (Models, plans, drawings, and photographs of Speer’s Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg filled the first two rooms of the second part of the exhibition, directly across the Honor Court from those of Paul Troost; through this placement, Hitler’s “first” architects framed or bracketed the exhibition as a whole.) Thus, in the exhibition, as later in the book, Troost’s buildings formed the portal through which National Socialist architecture emerged, shaping the visitor’s perception of a direct lineage. Upstairs, among the furniture and decorative arts exhibits, Paul Troost’s designs for tables, cabinets, chairs, lamps, and other interior furnishings were also generously represented.33

Although Speer had by then assumed the mantle of the Führer’s architect, he understood not to upstage Paul Troost when working with his widow (fig. 37). Speer had early on realized her influence and courted her favor. After the war, Gerdy Troost recalled how Speer had hung around the Chancellery construction site in 1935, trying to ingratiate himself. Although older by only one year, Troost took on the role of a mentor, often inviting Speer to dinner. (She later said that her younger brother’s death that year in a motorcycle accident had made her “very soft.”) They became friendly, and it was therefore a shock when, two years after they had first met, Troost was introduced to a Mrs. Speer at a reception—in all that time, Speer had never mentioned a wife. Troost found this “unnatural” and a sign of his ambition; he had calculated, she assumed, that she would be more interested in him if she thought he were single. Nonetheless, the two remained cordial throughout the Third Reich. In an August 1944 letter from Speer to Troost, he wrote, “What a pity that we never see each other anymore.”34

When Speer published his memoirs in 1969, distancing himself from Hitler and National Socialism, Troost developed an obsessive loathing for the man she now considered a liar and a traitor. Among her personal papers in the Bavarian State Library is a thick file dedicated to him. It contains newspaper clippings, notes, and a short text she wrote, “On the Albert Speer Question.” Many of the former members of Hitler’s inner circle shared her feelings; in fact, their common dislike of Speer seems to have brought them closer together.35 Troost did not restrict her views on Speer to this group of friends, but openly criticized him in interviews. Troost’s 1971 conversation with John Toland is peppered with her rebuttals to Speer’s biography.36 Additionally, she told Toland an anecdote about Speer that he included in his book and that also appears in her “Speer Question” manuscript. The latter version is worth repeating here, as it includes revealing details that do not appear in Toland’s text:

During lunch with Adolf Hitler in his Chancellery apartment—this was in the summer of 1935—Dr. Goebbels asked me, “You have known Speer for quite some time now; what do you think of him?” Me: “I can answer that best with a comparison.” Turning to Hitler—I was sitting between him and Goering; we were a small group, joined only by the adjutants Schaub and Brückner—“So, you, Herr Hitler”—back then I still called him by his name—“say to my husband, ‘Honored Herr Professor, I need a building of 100 meters.’ My husband replies: ‘I must think this over, but I will give you my decision by tomorrow.’ The next day he reports: ‘For structural and aesthetic reasons, the building can only be 96 meters long.’ Then you say to Herr Speer: ‘Dear Speer, I need a building of 100 meters.’ Speer immediately ejects: ‘Jawohl mein Führer—200 meters!’ And you clap him on the back and say, ‘Speer, you are my man!’” We all laughed a lot at this comparative joke, most of all Hitler. But we did not then sense how horribly its deep, tragic truth would bring catastrophe upon us.37

As the last line indicates, for Troost the joke about Speer’s character exposed something far darker than his unbridled architectural ego. After the war, confronted by the Nazis’ genocidal crimes, Troost refused to reconsider her devotion to Hitler. Rather than hold him accountable for Germany’s disgrace, she came to blame Speer. “His ambition, his obsession with power,” she told the historian Matthias Schmidt, had encouraged Hitler’s worst tendencies and “steered us into disaster.”38 Troost may also have been upset at how Speer’s memoirs elevated his own role in National Socialist architecture. Although he paid obeisance to Paul Troost as his mentor, recalling how he had often visited him in his studio in Munich and thereby developed a close relationship with him—a claim that infuriated Gerdy Troost, who insisted that the two had never met—Speer clearly no longer felt the need to play second fiddle. Nor could she have been happy with how he portrayed her as her dead husband’s merciless, aggressive protector.39

Yet as important a role as Gerdy Troost did play in upholding her husband’s legacy, after his death, as Schaub states, she emerged as a power in her own right. Hitler’s growing trust in her abilities led to important new commissions, among them the renovation of the Prince Carl Palace. The neoclassical mansion, designed by Karl von Fischer in 1803, was located at the head of Prince Regent Street in Munich, adjacent to the House of German Art. Since 1924 it had served as the seat of the Bavarian prime minister, but Hitler ordered the resident prime minister, Ludwig Siebert, to vacate it so that it could be converted into a guesthouse for state visitors, the first of whom was to be Benito Mussolini. Hitler, who was desperate to impress the Italian leader, did not skimp on the budget. The structure of the house was remodeled by the state architect Fritz Gablonsky, who demolished a previously added northern wing and built a new extension to the rear (western) side. Troost was responsible for furnishing the interior, down to the china. The project cost 1.3 million Reichsmarks, an enormous sum to spend on a single residence, comparable in price to purchasing multiple luxury apartment buildings in Munich.40

Since the Prince Carl Palace was neither one of her husband’s commissions nor intended for Hitler, Gerdy Troost was free to design in a manner closer to her own personal style, which blended modern and traditional influences, as seen in her own spacious Munich apartment (fig. 38). For the furniture, she mixed pieces produced by the United Workshops for Art in Handicraft (including designs by Paul Troost) with antiques borrowed from the galleries of the Munich and Würzburg residences. Paintings were loaned from the Bavarian state collections. Troost spent 125,000 Reichsmarks alone on Persian carpets.41 The new reception room, a large-scale photograph of which was included in the 1938 German Architecture and Applied Arts Exhibition, reveals Troost’s awareness of contemporary design trends, particularly in the emphasis on horizontal lines, indirect lighting, rich colors, and sensual materials, such as the red velour upholstery of the sofas and armchairs, which matched the red cloak worn by one of the attacking gods in Peter Paul Rubens’s 1618 painting, The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus, hung above the sofa and borrowed from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (fig. 39). The voluptuous materials extended to Mussolini’s bathroom, which featured a sunken black marble bathtub surrounded by black marble walls. The house offered every possible comfort and luxury to its honored guest: an order specified that there were to be “fruit in the rooms, Fachingen water, an espresso machine, cognac, vermouth, cigars, cigarettes on a table in the hall.” The library contained books that had been specially bound for the visit in leather and gold. On the morning of September 25, 1937, Mussolini stopped at the house for forty minutes, then returned around noon for another ten minutes, and finally spent an hour and forty minutes there in the late afternoon before boarding a train for Berlin. He returned in 1938, but once again did not spend the night. Afterward, the house remained largely unused until 1945.42

If money was seldom an issue for Hitler’s designers, other resources were. In 1936, Hitler announced his party’s Four-Year Plan for economic reform, which limited foreign imports and curtailed the use of materials needed for rearmament, creating shortages that interfered with building projects, including those of the Führer. Already by 1935, the production of purely natural fabrics, such as cotton and wool, had ceased and, after 1936, was increasingly replaced by poor-quality synthetic textiles.43 While imposing severe restrictions on the rest of the nation, Hitler insisted that the best natural materials be made available for his buildings; the Führer would neither sit nor stride on rayon. In December 1936, Hitler told the director of the Raw Materials Allocation Department for the Four-Year Plan that his buildings should be given preferential treatment.44 When, in 1937, Troost was having trouble securing the Italian silk needed for Hitler’s Munich buildings, he ordered his Economics Ministry to make supplying the Atelier Troost a priority.45 The scale of Hitler’s projects further aggravated his designers’ inventory problems. As architectural historian Paul Jaskot has shown, Albert Speer, confronted with the massive quantities of building materials required for the proposed rebuilding of Berlin, displayed his “resourcefulness” as Hitler’s chief architect by signing contracts with the SS to supply the labor of concentration camp inmates to manufacture bricks and quarry stones.46

Once the war began, retaining craftsmen and construction workers became another pressing issue confronting Hitler’s architects as more and more young men were drafted to the front. To protect his most highly prized artists and designers as well as his projects, Hitler drew up with Goebbels a list of those to be exempted from military service by virtue of their “God-given” talent (this list also included composers, performers, writers, and filmmakers).47 This did not, however, alleviate the problem of who would work for them. Beginning in 1940 and continuing for years, Troost found herself battling the military brass over her drafted workers, trying to extricate them from battlefields in order to return them to their atelier desks.48

On January 1, 1939, Troost and Gall officially dissolved their partnership, which had all but ended in the fall of 1937, when Paul Troost’s buildings were completed. Nonetheless, they continued to share the Troost Atelier premises and name as well as the services of a secretary. Gall retained the architectural staff for his own commissions and, later, for repairing bomb damage to Paul Troost’s buildings.49 In 1937, Gerdy Troost had begun to work in a new area of design: the creation of certificates and presentation folders and boxes for Third Reich awards.50 After the start of the war, she largely devoted herself to this realm of artistic production, which developed into its own cottage industry. As she herself described it, her role involved developing the design in close collaboration with one or two other artists and overseeing the production.51 She also discussed the projects with her clients and managed a host of suppliers. The certificates and presentation folders for the more prestigious awards, which were published in Nazi art journals, were costly artifacts, due to the materials and the level of artistry involved in their creation. The certificates were handwritten on parchment with gold leaf, while the containers were sometimes richly worked in gold and bejeweled with diamonds, rubies, and other precious gems, in imitation of medieval reliquaries or treasure bindings.52 As attested by Troost’s correspondence, Hitler took a great interest in, and even contributed ideas for, the documentation and cases created for these awards, which ranged from high military to civilian honors. The nature and number of the awards and certificates mushroomed in the war years as Hitler sought to buy loyalties with decorations and paper laurels. In early November 1940—some two months after the Royal Air Force first bombed Berlin, shocking its residents, who had believed Göring’s promise that he would keep them safe—Troost designed a godparent certificate for children born in the new Reich Chancellery bunker. Hitler acted as honorary godfather, as if the event were an auspicious beginning for the baby rather than a horror.53

The German occupation of foreign countries created new sources for materials and labor. For the construction of a communications bunker at the Brown House in Munich, begun in December 1943, Gall used over one hundred Ostarbeiter, forced laborers from conquered eastern territories. Troost, who shared offices with him, must have known about the nature of his laborers, especially since two of them were shot.54 Moreover, among her business correspondence is a copy of a 1944 letter sent by her parchment supplier to the Chancellery regarding his inability to keep up with his orders for the Führer’s certificates due to ongoing labor difficulties, including his Ostarbeiter running away. He wrote requesting help with obtaining a permit for building materials to expand a storage shed in his workers’ camp so that he could house two Ostarbeiter families, promised to him “on the next transport” as additional labor. The letter was in Troost’s files because the Chancellery had sent it to her to ask whether they should intervene.55 Starting in late 1942, Troost received enormous quantities of diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and other jewels from occupied France worth millions in today’s dollars.56 After the war, she was accused of having used diamonds stolen from Dutch Jews for her military decorations. The diamonds had been acquired by the Rosenberg Task Force (Einsatzstab Rosenberg), a special Nazi organization dedicated specifically to plundering occupied countries.57 Although she later claimed, like Hitler’s other artistic collaborators, not to have known anything about the nefarious activities of the regime, her business records reveal that it was impossible to carry out the Führer’s commissions without operating within the regime’s political and economic system and thereby participating in its crimes.

Troost was by no means coerced into such complicity. To the contrary, she eagerly accepted Hitler’s commissions and proposed new projects to him (taking over the design of the certificates and presentation cases had been her idea).58 As her letter to Alice Hess revealed, Troost cherished working with Hitler, and the dictator seems to have reciprocated the feeling. “For Hitler,” Schaub wrote, “she was the ideal conversational partner with whom he could talk endlessly about his architectural plans, who understood him, and who gave his ideas practical form in design.”59 In her postwar trial, Troost confirmed that Hitler was “obsessed with architecture and happy to be able to talk with someone about it.”60 Perhaps because of the importance of her relationship to the Führer as well as her own idealism, Troost downplayed the financial dimension of her work. Already in 1934, she had refused to incorporate the Atelier Troost, against her lawyer’s advice, because she felt that adding “GmbH” to the name (indicating a limited liability company) left a “peculiar ‘Jewish’ aftertaste.”61 In her mind, she did not want her “pure” artistic devotion to her husband’s legacy to be debased by the soulless commercial motives that Nazi propaganda associated with Jews. After the war, Troost vehemently denied that she had profited financially from the Nazi regime, insisting that her fortune, worth many millions in today’s dollars, had been left to her by her husband.62 Nonetheless, financial records show that the rich widow grew far wealthier during the Third Reich. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of Reichsmarks she earned from her work from 1934 to 1945, she also received three tax-free gifts from Hitler of 100,000 Reichsmarks each in 1940, 1942, and 1943.63 Hitler was in the habit of making such generous gestures to those whom he wished to reward and bind closer to him: military leaders, government ministers, artists, and others received cash awards.64 In her trial, forced to account for these funds, Troost explained that Hitler had originally intended the gift (only one of which had been discovered by the prosecutors) as compensation for her unpaid work at the Chancellery and on the Obersalzberg (for which she had not charged him an honorarium). Troost said that she planned to refuse the money and had told Hitler, “I do not want our personal connection to be mixed up with money.” They then agreed that the money would be used to establish a Paul Troost archive, which would have been part of a planned contemporary history museum. The judges were not convinced.65

Beyond financial gain, Hitler’s favored architects enjoyed the high social status of a regime that placed (state-sanctioned) art on a pedestal. Troost not only designed awards—she also received them. On his birthday in April 1937, Hitler bestowed upon her the title of professor. Later that summer, on the occasion of the Day of German Art festival that preceded the inauguration of the House of German Art, the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts conferred upon Troost its silver medal of honor. In 1943, Hitler awarded her the Golden Honor Badge, a rare distinction given once a year at his discretion to those who had rendered outstanding service to the Nazi Party or state.66 (The more common Golden Party Badge was a special merit accorded to early members of the Nazi Party with membership numbers below one hundred thousand and faithful service to the party. Gerdy Troost did not receive this version, since she had joined the party on August 1, 1932, with a membership number of 1,274,722.67) These honors, and particularly the possession of the badge, would cause her further difficulties with her postwar prosecutors, who saw them as proof of her value and contributions to the regime. Among the evidence presented at her trial was a letter she had written to Hitler the day after the ceremony awarding her the badge, in which she all but confirmed their suspicions:

Mein Führer, how can I thank you and what should I say to you? I am still completely moved by this deepest and most beautiful of obligations and joys with which you—I do not know, if you can understand me in this, but this is how I see it—have filled me through the bestowal of this holiest of symbols that can be given from your hand.

This proud and honoring bond to what we now consider the symbolic golden age of your early struggle and to the eternally illuminating spirit of your first fellow combatants will ordain my life and my work for you now more than ever, with all my effort and devotion.68

Like her late husband, Troost cared little for the lavish parties of the Third Reich elite and declined the social invitations of Hitler, who told her that her constant refusals verged on being a snub. After completing the Berghof interiors in 1936, she avoided the Obersalzberg’s social clique, later admitting that “part of his circle was not my cup of tea, and I also needed my time for my work.”69 She did, however, regularly attend his official art openings and other cultural functions. Over the years, she was photographed in the company of Hitler, Göring, Goebbels, Himmler, and other Nazi bigwigs viewing the Great German Art exhibitions, on the review stand of the Day of German Art festivals, at the dedication of Paul Troost’s Munich buildings, and at many other public events (plate 10). A tall, slender woman, she cut a distinctive figure and was certainly aware of the impression she made. For these events, she preferred dressing entirely in white, making her stand out prominently from the brown and black uniforms that surrounded her.

Troost’s repeated appearances at Hitler’s side soon brought her to the attention of the German public and media. A July 1937 newspaper article about her, written by journalist Sophie Rützow and published in the Münchner Neueste Nachrichten (Munich Latest News), observed that “thousands of people saw this woman during the festival days and dedication of the House of German Art. In her white lady’s suit she sat during the festivities in the front row of the guests of honor, her place near the Führer. For these days of celebration were likewise days of glory for her. It was her work, too, that was being dedicated and delivered to the German people.” While Troost had not been unknown before this, the inauguration of the House of German Art shone a spotlight on the young widow. On opening day, July 18, 1937, the cover of the Berlin illustrated weekly Welt-Spiegel (Mirror of the World) featured an image of Troost in the House of German Art gazing with rapt attention at the Führer beside her (fig. 40). A few days earlier, the Nazi Party newspaper, Völkischer Beobachter (People’s Observer), published an article about Troost that paid tribute to her as the loyal trustee of her late husband’s artistic estate. It acknowledged her personal creative contribution only in the decoration of the interiors, particularly in the “feminine” sphere of colors. Rützow’s article, by contrast, portrayed Troost more fully as her husband’s artistic collaborator, capable of advancing his buildings because she had been immersed in the projects from the start and could draw on her memories of their conversations. Whereas the Völkischer Beobachter had Frau Troost managing the office and standing guard as the buildings took form, Rützow placed her in the midst of construction sites and meetings. Rützow also emphasized Troost’s considerable impact on the applied arts, thus representing her as an influential artist in her own right.70

Over the years, Troost appeared in popular books about Hitler, the illustrated tabloids, newspapers, women’s magazines, and design journals. The April 1939 issue of die neue linie, an elegant lifestyle magazine, ran a feature on nine of Hitler’s favored architects and placed her image and biography first (followed by Leonhard Gall, Albert Speer, and, in fourth place, Paul Troost).71 Among her papers are numerous requests for press interviews that she did not always have time to give. The attention from the German media was uniformly positive, at least until the end of the war. In the same period, the American press was somewhat cooler, but not yet overtly critical. In a widely published 1938 story on the women around Hitler, Louis Lochner, Berlin correspondent for the Associated Press, drew attention to Troost’s influence as a member of “Hitler’s inner circle.” His description of her physical appearance, with which he began his account, suggested a person of disquieting power. She was, he wrote, “apparently in the late thirties, with deep-set, fanatic dark eyes, a pointed, inquisitive nose, generous mouth and ears, and determined jaw, her dark bobbed hair combed back straight from the forehead.” The following year, Sigrid Schultz, Berlin correspondent for the Chicago Daily Tribune, who had close connections with the Nazi elite, portrayed Troost as Hitler’s design assistant: “[She] carries out Hitler’s suggestions for interior decorations and submits sketches for interiors to him. Great efforts are being made to create a new style that in some dim future might rank with Empire, Chippendale, or other styles distinctive to their periods. It is a goal toward which Hitler is striving and the wives of the subleaders are anxiously attempting to emulate him or make new suggestions and thus win Hitler’s favor.” Schultz, however, misidentified Troost, perhaps not accidentally, as Frau Professor Frost.72

In Germany, Troost discovered that the media attention and public recognition brought with it an unwanted role: intercessor. In a nation whose government revolved around the desire and will of a single man, having access to and influence over the Führer made one a very powerful person. The chancellor was shielded by his staff, and even his ministers had trouble obtaining an audience. Troost, by contrast, saw him regularly, usually in her Munich studio. Indeed, senior politicians sometimes asked her to intervene on their behalf, knowing she had the Führer’s ear.73 Among Troost’s papers are countless letters, the majority from strangers, requesting her help, offering a microcosmic view of the human misery wrought by the Nazi regime. Their writers included a mixed-race bookstore owner trying to hold on to her business; an imprisoned art historian who had lost his university position and freedom because of his sexuality; a businessman trying to obtain the release of Jewish relatives interned during Crystal Night; and a widow desperate to secure a military exception for her sole surviving son.74 Many asked Troost to pass on letters to the Führer, knowing that she saw him regularly. Although she did occasionally intervene, in most cases she politely declined the requests, referring them to the Chancellery.

Troost’s power to change lives with a well-placed comment is revealed by the case of Ragnar Berg, a Swedish-born biochemist and nutritionist who worked at the Rudolf Hess Hospital in Dresden until his funding dried up in 1936. Troost was avidly interested in the field of nutrition, perhaps because of her own health problems. In her early twenties, Troost had survived a near-fatal automobile accident, the injuries from which continued to plague her; she also suffered from attacks of angina pectoris, aggravated by stress and overwork. In the fall of 1942, Troost experienced a health crisis and spent three months recuperating at the Berchtesgaden sanatorium of Dr. Werner Zabel, who also advised Theodor Morell, Hitler’s doctor, on the Führer’s vegetarian diet.75 (Her collapse was likely induced by the mounting pressures to fill Hitler’s proliferating orders for military certificates. It was after this illness that Hitler, perhaps worried about losing her as he had lost her husband, awarded her the Golden Honor Badge.) Troost met Berg at the sanatorium, and he confided that his research had come to a standstill. Troost then had a conversation with Hitler about Berg, and to the latter’s astonishment and delight, his funding was promptly restored.76

On a number of occasions, Troost intervened to help those persecuted under Nazi Germany’s anti-Semitic legislation and policies, usually (although not always) people she knew through her social or professional circles. Among them was Karl Wessely, a world-renowned ophthalmologist and professor in Munich, widely considered to be a great clinician and surgeon. He was also of Jewish descent, and in 1935, following the ratification of the racial Nuremberg Laws, lost his position and was denied his pension. For a few years, Wessely practiced privately in his apartment, but in September 1938, a new law decertified all Jewish doctors. Paul Troost had been treated by Wessely before his death, and his wife had expressed her gratitude at the time for the doctor’s help, which had lessened her husband’s suffering. Later, she would be able to demonstrate it in more concrete ways. After Wessely’s license was revoked, Troost defended him as a man and doctor to Hitler and even showed him a picture of Wessely’s children, whose education had been thrown into turmoil because of their Jewish ancestry. Hitler initially resisted her efforts to sway him; the Völkischer Beobachter had maligned Wessely already in 1930 when he was named head of the university clinic, and there was a great deal of Nazi antipathy built up against him. Troost, however, persisted, and on another visit gave Hitler a letter from Wessely’s wife, which she insisted he read in her presence (rather than pass it off, as usual, to an adjutant). This apparently convinced him, and on Hitler’s personal order, Wessely’s license was reinstated in 1939, allowing him to continue his private practice. Troost had also helped on an earlier occasion, in November 1937, when the anti-Semitic exhibition The Eternal Jew opened at the German Museum in Munich, an institution dedicated to the history of science and technology. In one of the rooms, under a wall text that read “In the guise of science you have poisoned the German people” hung Wessely’s portrait. Alerted by a friend of Wessely’s wife, Troost complained to Bavarian Gauleiter Adolf Wagner and eventually succeeded in having the photograph removed.77

There is no question that Troost acted courageously in such interventions, and in more than one instance, her actions undoubtedly saved lives. At the same time, however, these individual cases do not add up clearly to a larger oppositional stance. In her postwar testimony, Maria Nachtigal, an artist and family friend, stated that Troost’s opposition to the Nazi Party’s position on Jews had repeatedly cost her “uncomfortable hours,” presumably in confronting those who disagreed with her, including Hitler.78 But at other times, Troost appears to have joined in and even abetted the broader anti-Semitic flow. Historian Wolfram Selig has argued that she lent support to the Ayranization of Wallach Haus, a leading Munich producer of traditional Bavarian costumes and folk art. Also notable is her role as a purchaser of artworks for Hitler’s proposed art museum in Linz. Of the seventy paintings she acquired from Munich dealers, the majority came from confiscated Jewish art collections, as she certainly would have known.79 Troost, moreover, tried to help Julius Streicher, who had hired her husband to renovate his Gauleiter headquarters in Nuremberg and with whom she remained friendly, after he was removed from office because his public attacks on Jews proved to be too excessive even for the Nazi Party. Troost’s willingness to defend victims of Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies must thus be weighed against her awareness of their persecution by a regime that she chose to support fully—as she said in her letter to Hitler, “with all my effort and devotion.”

Troost most faithfully served Hitler and enjoyed the greatest influence in the realm of the fine and applied arts. As a practitioner, one can point to her role in completing her husband’s buildings, her crafting of the look of National Socialist interiors, and her impact on the elite material culture of the regime, in the form not only of certificates and presentation folders and boxes, but also of utilitarian objects, such as silverware and china for Hitler, as well as of the many gifts that Hitler asked her to design, including the silver frames for his signed portrait that he ordered by the hundreds.80 Additionally, Troost acted as a kind of cultural arbiter, serving on juries, weighing in on academic appointments, and advancing her own artistic agenda.81 In her postwar trial, Troost was accused of having “occupied, as Hitler’s close friend, a near dictatorial position in artistic life during the Nazi era.”82 While exaggerated, this assessment nonetheless indicates both her real and perceived power. Her role on the House of German Art juries was particularly significant, as this was the state institution that sanctioned the new forms of artistic expression under the Third Reich, from painting to architecture. In her postwar defense, Troost emphasized her resistance to Hitler’s exclusion of modern artists, which had famously resulted in what she claimed was their only serious dispute, over what artworks would be included in the inaugural Great German Art Exhibition of 1937.

Troost was among an otherwise all-male jury of twelve artists and heads of art organizations charged with making a preliminary selection from the fifteen thousand paintings, drawings, and sculptures submitted for the first exhibition. German artists (a term that by then explicitly excluded Jews, who had been stripped of their citizenship by the 1935 Nuremberg Laws) were invited to send their “best” work, a directive that gave little guidance as to the qualities sought. Adding to the confusion was the regime’s apparent willingness to tolerate within its own ranks proponents of both more radical and conservative directions in art. Hitler’s own intolerance for modern art, moreover, was not yet broadly known. The jury’s selections included work that Hitler considered subversive and better suited to the Degenerate Art show, which opened in a nearby location the day after the official exhibition, and which was meant to serve as a counterexample to the new art fostered by the regime. There is no reason to believe that the jurors, most of whom had come to prominence under National Socialism, wanted to provoke Hitler; Troost said that they had aimed for a representative cross section of the entries, based on the quality of the work.83

On June 5, 1937, Hitler arrived with Goebbels from Berlin to review the jury’s selection at the House of German Art and make the final decisions, which he had reserved for himself. The jurors at first accompanied Hitler through the rooms, but as his displeasure became apparent and he began to argue with Troost (since the others, she claimed, kept silent), they slipped away, leaving Troost as the sole defender of their choices. Hitler also challenged the works that had been refused, prompting Troost to ask, “Why do you accept a painter only after he has had his second stroke?” and to protest that “even our grandmothers had rejected those old brown juices.” According to Goebbels, Hitler was “furious,” and although Troost “fought with the courage of a lion,” she could not sway him on behalf of the modern artists. Troost resigned her jury position on the spot; Hitler later dismissed the others and put his photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, who knew Hitler’s sentimental tastes, in charge of the selections. (Troost was nonetheless later asked to serve on future juries, which included only her, Hoffmann, and Karl Kolb, the House of German Art’s director.)84

News of the dispute leaked out and appeared in international newspapers. Paul Westheim, a German art critic writing in exile from Paris, reported that Hitler had told Troost that “she was also infested by cultural bolshevism,” whereupon Troost, half fainting, had had to retreat to another room—a version of events that made her bristle.85 Her own postwar testimony suggests, however, just how heated the exchange became (even if it did not, as she insisted, make her collapse). According to Troost, Hitler said, “Moscow remains neoclassical, and you save Bolshevism in Europe.” She answered, “You can lock me up, but I will always stand by my artistic convictions: this is art, and that is kitsch.”86 The altercation clearly did not affect their relationship. Troost claimed that the next time Hitler visited her studio, she had insisted on going over the issues once again, at length and with the aid of art history books, and that in this private setting, Hitler had been more willing to concede the merits of her argument. In retrospect, what seemed to bother her most of all was the behavior of the other jurors. At her postwar trial, she said that she had urged the art jury members to organize a united protest, but that they had done nothing, only sending her the next day, to her disappointment, “a very large bouquet of red roses and a letter of appreciation.” In her desire to avoid blaming Hitler, Troost believed that Germany’s “disgrace” might have been avoided if others had had the “personal courage” to stand up to him, and that it was possible to change his mind. Nonetheless, the trial’s chairman noted that she had failed to move Hitler about the exhibition, and that such opposition was, in any case, both pointless and dangerous when the all positions of power were occupied by his henchmen.87

Recalling the controversial day decades later, Troost said that she had been shocked and dismayed that Goebbels had sided with the Führer. The once-defender of “super modern artists” had made a “180 degree turn,” leaving Troost without an ally.88 Goebbels was likely not unhappy to see Troost thus isolated. While he admired her intelligence and talent, he also found her annoying and threatening. On January 21, 1936, after a lunch with Hitler and Troost, he noted in his diary, “Frau Troost makes cutting remarks. As always. I do not like her.”89 (Recalling Troost’s own lunchtime story about her Speer joke, one wonders if Goebbels, who prided himself on his witticisms, resented being upstaged.) According to Troost, their relationship was permanently damaged over the creation of Bavaria Filmkunst in 1938, the Munich film company that Goebbels vehemently opposed as a competitor to Universum Film AG (Ufa), which had its studios in Neubabelsberg, outside Berlin. Troost sat on Bavaria Filmkunst’s artistic advisory board (to Goebbels’s displeasure), and she later stated that it had been her mission to expand its studio complex in Geiselgasteig. Troost claimed that she had donated the initial funds to begin construction and had personally found a wealthy Munich donor to finance the rest.90 In his diary, Goebbels noted that Troost “intrigued” against him on the board.91

On November 21, 1940, Goebbels added a more personal, and pointed, comment about Troost to his diary: “Frau Troost is a clever woman, but bluestocking-ish.”92 Germans used the term Blaustrumpf, meaning “bluestocking,” to derogatorily refer to an educated woman as mannish, but it also strongly implied that she was a lesbian—in fact, it sometimes was used as a synonym. Goebbels, ever alert to his opponents’ vulnerabilities, may have learned that Troost had developed a close relationship with a female photographer and filmmaker named Hanni Umlauf. In the early 1930s, Umlauf established her own film company, Umlauf Films, which her younger brother, Walter, later joined as a partner. Together they made at least thirty-two short instructional films for government or National Socialist organizations, including women’s groups. Some were practical in nature, such as how to recycle waste (Waste Material-Raw Material, or Altstoff-Rohstoff, 1938), while others were intended as propaganda. Women’s War Effort (Kriegseinsatz der Frau, 1940), for example, was produced for the <sc>NSDAP</sc> Reich Women’s Leadership and depicted Nazi women’s organizations mobilizing and helping women during the war. The film presented a cheerful, well-functioning home front in which men were almost entirely absent.93 Umlauf also had considerable success with her color photography, which she took up in 1937. Her photographs of German landscapes and ethnographic portraits were exhibited and won awards as well as appearing in NS-Frauenwarte (NS-Women’s Watch), the official Nazi magazine for women.94

Troost and Umlauf appear to have met in the mid-1930s. A birthday letter Umlauf sent Troost in March 1951 noted that it was the first birthday in fifteen years that they had spent apart. By September 1939, the two women had moved in together in Munich and would continue to live together for the rest of their lives. The exact nature of their relationship remains a mystery; even family members are unsure, although they assume that they were a couple (it was not the kind of question that one could ask an aunt of this generation, nor the kind of information that she would have volunteered).95 In her letters to her close friend Gerdy Troost, Winifred Wagner referred to the loving relationship between Troost and Umlauf and to their “living together” (Zusammenleben). Troost, in turn, referred to Umlauf as “my Hanni.”96 Friends often addressed letters to both of them. Among Gerdy Troost’s personal papers in the Bavarian State Library is a small envelope that contains a handicapped identification card issued to her in her late eighties, the kind of thing that one would keep in one’s purse. Also in the envelope are six tiny photographs. One is of Paul Troost, taken the winter before they married, showing him standing in a snow-covered field, wearing a sweater and plus fours. Another depicts a landscape of reeds and water with mountains faintly in the background, probably taken at the shore of Chiemsee, a large lake in Bavaria where Troost had built a log cabin in 1936 as a weekend retreat. There are also three photographs of Troost and Umlauf together in a rowboat by the water’s edge. They appear to be in their late thirties, which makes it likely that the photographs are also from Chiemsee, taken not long after the cabin was built. The day is sunny and the two are in their bathing suits, absorbed in their activity, as if unaware of the photographer. The last picture is of Umlauf on the same day, this time by herself in the boat. One has the impression that at the end of her life, Troost wanted to keep close to her the images of the people and places that she had loved most.

Whether the relationship was romantic or not, Troost and Umlauf clearly shared a deep and meaningful bond. Their domestic life diverged wildly from National Socialist ideals of German womanhood: two young women, pursuing successful professional careers, unencumbered by male spouses or children. Although only twenty-nine years old when widowed, Troost chose not to remarry or, as far as we know, have other relationships with men. She remained, from a public point of view, devoted to the memory of her late husband. Her private life, however, might have raised eyebrows among those who knew about Umlauf. Although the Nazis focused their persecution of homosexuals on men, lesbians also lived in fear of discovery. Female couples living together risked a neighbor or landlord’s denunciation and a visit from the Gestapo.97 Whether Hitler knew about Troost’s relationship with Umlauf is not known. Regardless, it is significant that the domestic image of this bachelor was crafted to a large extent by a woman whose private life also did not remotely conform to Nazi ideals.

When war came, Troost was shocked. She later said that she had believed Hitler when he had assured her that there would be no conflict and that he wanted peace. Unconcerned, she had sold a valuable lake property in mid-August 1939, despite the fact that the buyer himself told her that it was unwise to do so with war imminent. But like others who tried to warn her, she ignored him.98 On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded its neighbor to the east. A week later, Troost bought herself a map of Poland.99 The receipt for it, tucked amid other sales slips, is the first sign of her awareness that life as it had once been was about to change.

In late 1944, Troost herself headed eastward. She was one of only two women permitted to visit Hitler at his “Wolf’s Lair” Führer Headquarters, located in the woods near the small East Prussian town of Rastenburg (now Poland). When she was asked about this trip in 1999 by Martha Schad, Troost replied that she had gone because she needed Hitler’s signature on prepared certificates as well as for “a very personal reason” that she declined to discuss. The true purpose of her visit was Hitler’s request to mate their two German shepherds, a breed they both loved. In the same way Hitler had acquired Blondi, Troost had obtained her dog through Martin Bormann.100 (On neo-Nazi and nationalist websites, the question of surviving descendants of the Hitler-Troost puppies remains an avid topic of discussion.) Troost was disturbed by Hitler’s physical condition: “He walked severely hunched over and his right arm shook. On the other hand, his confidence in the victory of German weaponry was rock-solid.” Troost said that his unshakable faith reinforced her own. It was the last time she saw him.101

On the night of April 24, 1944, a bombing raid damaged the building that had housed the Atelier Troost, and Hitler offered Troost work spaces in the Führerbau. The firm’s archive was stored in the bomb-proof basement, which Troost believed to be secure.102 Troost remained in her Munich apartment until the end of April 1945, fleeing to the town of Chieming just eight days before the arrival of American troops.103 The Atelier Troost materials in the Führerbau were confiscated by American soldiers and deposited with the Central Collecting Point, next door in the former <sc>NSDAP</sc> Administration Building. Later, they were sent as captured war documents to Washington, D.C., where they remained for decades.

In Chieming, Troost lived in her one-room cabin with no running water or electricity.104 As she later told prosecutors, the Atelier Troost closed and her design projects ended on the day the U.S. Army marched into Munich.105 Instead, she became, by necessity, a farmer. Umlauf had started a small organic farm on the cabin’s lakeside property in 1942. Before the currency reform of 1948, in an economy of shortages and bartering, the two women had managed to get by growing and selling produce, although it took a toll on Troost’s health. According to Troost’s doctor, the manual labor as well as the chilly dampness of the house brought on rheumatism, and the stress of the trial aggravated her angina. She was also malnourished and underweight. A photograph of Troost that appeared in a 1949 newspaper article about her trial shows her looking strained and gaunt.106 Still, many hungry and homeless Germans in those years would have envied the roof over her head and her garden.

Like all other adult German civilians in the American occupation zone, Troost underwent a denazification process, which involved filling out a questionnaire about one’s activities and memberships during the Third Reich, being classified according to one of five categories ranking criminal involvement in the regime (1. major offenders; 2. offenders; 3. lesser offenders; 4. followers; 5. exonerated persons), and, if necessary, testifying before a civilian tribunal and being sanctioned. According to Troost, she was also placed under house arrest, which she resented not only because of the confinement—she was allowed to leave, she later recalled, only to see the dentist or the American military authorities—but also because of the four “US-Negern,” meaning the African American soldiers, assigned to guard her.107 Troost’s denazification was a drawn-out affair, beginning in the fall of 1946 in Traunstein and ending over three years later, in the spring of 1950, in a Munich courtroom. Delays were caused by the difficulties obtaining information from various authorities in the chaotic years after the war (files had burned, witnesses had died or scattered), the change in venue, the discovery of the Atelier Troost archives at the Central Collecting Point in 1949, Troost’s absent or alternating lawyers, her deteriorating physical condition, and her own attempts to obfuscate the facts, particularly regarding how much she had profited financially during the Third Reich.

What she could or would not hide, however, was her devotion to the Führer. Those many appearances at his side, captured by the media, now worked against her: people knew she had been a powerful and loyal follower. A July 11, 1945, report from Chieming’s mayor on Troost stated that “Her pre-eminent position among Hitler’s most intimate friends certainly is sufficiently well known. He often visited her here incognito. Just a short while ago she appeared here at an assembly convened by the Kreisleiter [<sc>NSDAP</sc> district leader] to testify to Hitler’s unbroken power. . . . Naturally, she is and remains a fanatical Nazi follower.”108 Wilhelm Corsten, Troost’s financial advisor, who stepped in to represent her in the absence of her first lawyer (Hans Laternser, who was busy defending Luftwaffe General Field Marshal Albert Kesselring), warned her before her initial hearing in Traunstein, held on January 21, 1947, that “it would be regrettable if the chairman were to receive a false impression of you and then no longer be in the position to rectify aberrant perceptions among the associate judges. I suspect that the chairman holds the entirely wrong opinion, conveyed to him by others, that even today you champion the ideology of the Third Reich. On the occasion of your meeting, the tribunal chairman can satisfy himself that you do not belong to the thugs of the Nazi regime.”109 Troost did not take the hint. In her first and subsequent court appearances, she spouted Nazi propaganda, defended Hitler, and thoroughly confirmed suspicions of her stubborn, unreconstructed beliefs.

On the stand, Troost described her life in the Third Reich as a peaceful, enclosed orb: she lived, breathed, and thought only about art. Her relationship to Hitler, she averred, had been conducted on an entirely artistic plane. When Schleifer, the tribunal chairman, asked whether she could not have said something to the dictator about “how things looked outside,” she insisted that she had not known. “But surely you did not see only the four walls of your studio?” Schleifer asked. “These walls were not blinders, were they?” Troost, in response, waxed poetic about how “when I emerged from the stillness of my studio and entered building sites and workshops, I saw only bright and shining eyes and experienced only the most touching and overwhelming scenes, from little old ladies to young construction workers. And no wonder, for they all had work again and were full of hope after these terrible years of unemployment.” Schleifer retorted, “I cannot believe what you say, and even if you recited it on bended knee, I still could not believe you, that you knew nothing, especially you, with your experience of foreign countries, how things looked from abroad.” Troost maintained her ignorance: her orb of art had no burning synagogues or Gestapo torture chambers. At her second hearing, held on February 13, 1948, in Munich, Troost went so far as to claim that not a single person in her broad circle of professional and social acquaintances had been sent to a concentration camp. At her final set of hearings, on February 23–24, 1950, in Munich, Troost continued to be confronted with the same questions and doubts and to make the same denials.110 Yet, throughout these hearings, Troost had built her defense on the backs of those persecuted by the regime. She offered testimonials from dozens of people whom she had helped, representing a broad range of the regime’s victims and terrors, which proved that she was well aware of what went on beyond the four walls of her studio.

While Troost did occasionally lie outright—for example, she insisted that she had never used her position in the Third Reich to benefit her family, although private documents confirm that her father’s business, which went bankrupt in 1932, recovered and prospered thanks to her mediations—the paradoxes in her testimony are also rooted in the self-denial and cognitive dissonance that was enabled and fostered by Nazi propaganda.111 “How can a person who can be so kind,” she asked Schleifer, “so attached to his dog, who can look at a child with such love, who can stand before a work of art and contemplate it with such feeling, how can such a person be a murderer? How can I accept this? It is inconceivable to me; I cannot put these things together.”112 Troost also flatly refused to believe that Hitler had known about the atrocities carried out in his name, which had fully come to light at the Nuremberg Trials less than two years earlier. Keeping the Führer pure in her mind, recalling him as “warm and kindhearted,” was also a self-protective measure: if her good friend were not to blame, then neither was she.

Troost, used to being in charge, provoked the tribunal members with her interruptions, questions, and demands for corrections to the record. At her 1948 hearing in Munich, Troost was asked about her and her husband’s meetings with Hitler and whether they had talked about political matters. She maintained that their conversations had been solely about architectural and artistic questions. The chairman, dictating to the secretary transcribing the proceedings, told her to note that the discussions had been about “architectural and other problems that were not in keeping with National Socialist ideology.” Troost interjected: “If I may interrupt, I must add here that it is necessary to first clarify what you understand by N. S. ideology. If you mean K. Z. [concentration camp] practices and the things that have filled us all with deep shame, then, of course, neither I nor my husband had anything to do with that. But if N. S. ideology is understood as being a social human being, that is, to feel beholden to one’s people as the people of Beethoven and Kant and thus be at the service of humanity, then naturally there were National Socialist ideologies with which we were imbued.” The chairman replied, “It is a question here of tyranny, dictatorship, torture, K. Z. and so forth. So,” to the secretary, “write: N. S. ideology.”113

Curt von Stackelberg, Troost’s second (but not final) lawyer, sought to recast Troost’s unreconstructed Nazi beliefs as the romanticized, political cluelessness of the artist. In a written defense submitted to the tribunal, Stackelberg argued that “the artist exists largely outside the political, social, and economic order of the public sphere, leading instead a meditative life of his own in the timeless world of art, in a dream realm. . . . Just as in daily life, so must a different standard apply to the creative person in political life.”114 And yet the National Socialist regime, perhaps more than any other in contemporary history, fused art and politics. It understood the role of the artist as fundamentally ideological in nature and hence carefully controlled artistic activity. Even so, in the postwar period, National Socialist artists, including Troost, commonly asserted that their state projects had had nothing to do with politics. Reporting on Troost’s 1950 trial, the Süddeutsche Zeitung (South German Newspaper) said that she was “bewildered” by the question of whether building the House of German Art had in some way furthered National Socialist tyranny.115 Albert Stenzel, chair of the Creative Artists Commission in the Bavarian State Ministry of Education and Culture, prepared an expert report for the denazification trial of Leonhard Gall (who also successfully employed the argument of the apolitical artist), in which he protested the essential dishonesty of this position. Stenzel, however, who was strongly anti-Nazi, was considered unobjective and thus ignored.116 In subsequent decades, historians would explore the powerful ideological role played by artists, demonstrating how the aesthetic sheen they gave the regime—in posters, films, parades, monuments, and a thousand different objects, from radios to military awards—had helped to disguise its putrid core.117

As a holder of the Golden Honor Badge, Troost was automatically classed as a “major offender,” the highest of the five categories, the penalties for which included death, imprisonment, and hard labor, among other lesser alternatives. When asked in court how she would rank herself, she replied that she would create a new designation: “decent National Socialists who believed.”118 Clearly, Troost felt that she had done no wrong. In her closing words to the tribunal on February 24, 1950, she stated that “she always acted with human and moral sensitivity and thus even today pleads a clear conscience with regard to her earlier conduct.”119 When the tribunal members issued their verdict on March 2, 1950, they noted that Troost still had not managed to free herself from her bond to Hitler.120 In as much as the denazification procedure was intended by the Allies not only to punish, but also to rehabilitate, in the case of Gerdy Troost, it failed miserably.

Troost was ultimately categorized as a “lesser offender,” two levels below “major offender,” and might have been ranked even lower had it not been for the 100,000-Reichsmarks gift from Hitler. Her punishment consisted of a two-year period of probation (beginning on the date of the verdict) and a fine of 5,000 Deutschmarks. During the probationary period, her earnings were capped at 200 Deutschmarks per month, she lost her enfranchisement and the right to use her professor title, and she was forbidden to have an automobile, among other restrictions. (The latter was no small thing. The cabin was isolated, and after the war, both Troost and Umlauf had had their cars confiscated. For years, they delivered their vegetables and managed their own transportation by bicycle.) Troost was also liable for a small amount (6,500 Deutchmarks, or 5 percent) of the substantial court costs.121

By comparison, her collaborator, Leonhard Gall, fared much better. He was tried in 1948 as a “major offender,” but was found to be a “follower,” the second-lowest category possible, one below that of Troost. His punishment was also far milder. He was fined only 250 Deutschmarks, in addition to having to pay 5 percent (3,250 Deutchmarks) of the court costs. The different outcomes of their trials is striking when one considers that they were partners, and that Gall held many prestigious appointments during the regime, including senator of the Reich Chamber of Culture and honorary vice-president of the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts, as well as being awarded the title of professor in 1935 and the Golden Honor Badge in 1944. Moreover, unlike Troost’s involved verdict justification, which included a psychological assessment theorizing that she was particularly susceptible to the power of Hitler’s gaze, Gall’s short verdict reads like an apologia on behalf of the accused. (Troost clearly represented a conundrum to the tribunal in a way that Gall did not.) In his court appearance and submitted materials, Gall effectively presented himself as a simple, unpretentious man, and he did not challenge or alienate his prosecutors, as Troost had, by debating the meaning of National Socialism or Hitler’s merits. Gall’s low fine also took into account his having volunteered for sixty days to clean up rubble, which the court took as a sign of responsibility.122 Gall did not call witnesses or submit anywhere near the number of testimonials of people whom he had helped in comparison to Troost. But Troost’s evidence of more serious intervention also spoke to her greater influence with Hitler, and it is ultimately for this and her ideological intransigency that she paid.

Troost (like Gall) successfully petitioned to have her court fines lowered, citing her lost fortune.123 In 1934, Troost had liquidated her late husband’s stock portfolio in Switzerland and transferred the funds to Germany. Her own investment strategies reflected her confidence in and support of the new Reich as well as her waning pacifism. Most of her fortune was placed in government bonds, which she continued to buy as late as 1944, despite the bleak news from the war fronts. She also held the stock of some of Hitler’s worst war-machine collaborators, including Dynamit Nobel (manufacturer of munitions for the Germany army) and I. G. Farben.124 Many of Troost’s investments became worthless after the war, while others were starkly depreciated. Her personal valuables, including her art collection and jewelry, were confiscated or looted. In the end, she largely lost not only what she had gained during the Third Reich, but also what she had inherited from her husband and family. Adding to her financial woes, the Munich Tax Office audited her past returns from the Third Reich and demanded back taxes.125

Six months into Troost’s two-year sentence, the Bavarian parliament passed a law lifting employment restrictions on lesser Nazi offenders, and Troost immediately returned to interior design, now working as an independent contractor.126 She partnered regularly with two firms specializing in cabinetwork: her father’s former company, German Woodcraft Studios in Bremen, and P. Vogler and Cie in Weinheim, a fine furniture manufacturer. She traveled extensively to meet with potential clients and to carry out commissions, primarily in the Ruhr region. With financial and political stability returning to West Germany, construction soared as its bombed cities turned to rebuilding. By the mid-1950s, Troost and German Woodcraft Studios had numerous joint projects underway, including banks, industrial buildings, hotels, corporate offices, and events facilities.127 This period also saw Troost developing a new geographical realm of activity: the Middle East. In 1962, she undertook the interior furnishing of a hotel in Amman, Jordan. She was also avidly pursued by a group of Egyptian businessmen, who wanted her to decorate their new six-hundred-room hotel in Cairo.128

But while she was busy, Troost struggled to get back on her feet. Her deteriorating health in the early 1960s, which she blamed on the stressful years after the war ended, increasingly prevented her from taking on large design commissions. Her name, moreover, stirred up old “political resentments,” putting her at a disadvantage. Troost also encountered a number of serious financial setbacks. Her loyalty to her father’s former firm cost her dearly: the firm went bankrupt twice in the 1950s, leaving Troost with crippling debts each time (and forcing her to sell her home on the Chiemsee by the end of the decade). She also discovered that the luxurious style with which she had made her reputation during the Third Reich no longer carried the same prestige. Clients did not want the expense of meticulously handcrafted furniture, and fine wood interiors seemed outdated. Instead, they preferred less costly and more modern industrial materials, such as steel and glass, harking back to the Bauhaus aesthetics that the Nazi elite had spurned for their own representative interiors.129

By the late 1960s, Troost’s interior design projects had dwindled, although she continued to receive the occasional commission into the late 1970s, when she was in her mid-seventies.130 These later assignments consisted of small-scale interior design projects for private residences. When not engaged in her own work, Troost helped Umlauf with her increasingly successful commercial photography and lithography business. In 1939, Umlauf had established a small fine arts reproduction press in Munich, specializing in figures of children and landscapes from modern and old masters.131 In the postwar period, she returned to these activities, publishing a book of color photography in 1952, Between the Rhein and the Ruhr (Zwischen Rhein und Ruhr), of industrial landscapes and factory interiors.132 She also produced slides and postcards. The two women traveled extensively on photography trips, mostly within West Germany, but also to France, Austria, and Italy. Writing to Winifred Wagner in 1970, Troost mentioned that Umlauf’s work was in demand and that business was prospering.133

Troost’s correspondence with Wagner provides insights into how the former elite of the Third Reich continued to socialize together and support each other after the war. In a 1962 letter to Troost, Wagner recounted a get-together with Hitler’s “scorned aristocrats” and described how “to my intense pleasure, [Tassilo] Fürstenberg told marvelous Jewish jokes in the middle of a public restaurant in a loudly raised voice.”134 When former Nazi artist Adolf Ziegler fell on hard times, Wagner took up a collection, to which Troost contributed (despite having intensely disliked his work).135

By the mid-1970s, Troost, too, needed help from her friends. In April 1975, to her distress, she was compelled to accept a loan from Wagner. To pay her back, she decided to sell a bronze sculpture by Eugen Henke, Girl Tying a Headscarf (Kopftuchbindes Mädchen), depicting a young nude woman wrapping her head in a scarf. Hitler had suggested the subject to Henke and liked the finished statue so much that he placed it prominently in the Berghof’s Great Hall, where it was often captured in contemporary photographs. As a gift to Troost, who had introduced him to Henke, Hitler had another bronze copy made for her, which she kept in her Munich apartment. Perhaps because it had not been owned by Hitler, the sculpture may have proved difficult to sell. That summer, Wagner wrote to Troost about an idea proposed to her by Lotte Pfeiffer-Bechstein (the daughter of Edwin and Helene Bechstein, whose piano-manufacturing wealth helped to finance the Nazi Party in its early years). At a tea party of old Nazi friends, Pfeiffer-Bechstein had discussed Troost’s financial problems, and one of her guests had wondered whether the statue “could be offered to [Idi] Amin, the president of Uganda, who currently wants to erect a Hitler monument in Kampala. Although he is black, he is an ardent admirer of Hitler and it seems to me that one should not have any scruples about selling to a Negro when one is not blessed with worldly goods. . . . We thought it a very good idea and it will not cost anything to try.”136 There is no direct evidence that Troost sold Amin the work, although the file she kept on the sculpture contains the business card of Gerhard Engel, Hitler’s former army adjutant and Wehrmacht lieutenant general; Engel was then the head of a company selling German arms abroad, including to Africa, suggesting that she planned to make inquiries through him.137 Over the years, Troost sold other artifacts she owned from the Third Reich period, including letters from Hitler and Göring.138

Women such as Troost, who operated in the highest echelons of the Third Reich, pose a conundrum to historians. Despite being complicit in a regime that was fundamentally elitist, racist, and sexist, could they be considered feminists in any sense?139 While the Nazi press depicted Troost as the faithful vessel of her husband’s work, she openly defied ideal gender norms by running one of the nation’s leading architectural firms, holding positions of influence and power, living independently, and having no children. Moreover, Troost often collaborated with female artists and patronized their work through her own design commissions. Yet although Troost contravened gender norms through her work and lifestyle and promoted individual women artists, she did not question the status of women or intervene on their behalf as a whole. This is revealed in a brief but telling exchange of letters in 1939 between Troost and Hanna Löv, a modernist architect who had been prominent in Munich during the Weimar Republic, but who struggled to find work in the Third Reich. “As the Führer’s close collaborator,” Löv wrote, “you will surely be able to answer a question of principle: Is it in accordance with the Führer’s intention and is it really the lot of women in the Third Reich to be permitted always and only to be the subordinate assistants of men who are not their superiors intellectually, artistically, or in their organizational skills, even when these women can prove their abilities at any time? Or, assuming that education, aptitude, and competence are present, can they also assert a claim to a senior position in their field of activity?” Troost answered curtly, “I am surprised at this question and by calling your attention to the fact that the Führer has, indeed, approved women, to the extent that they are suitable, for leading positions (for example, [Gertrud] Scholtz-Klink, Frau Winifried Wagner, Frau Leni Riefenstahl), I believe that any further reply on my part will be superfluous.” To which Löv, after a long delay, answered, “Unfortunately, as I have come to discover at every turn, you are almost the only person who admits to having this view on women. This idea has sadly not even remotely begun to penetrate among the men in charge of personnel decisions, not even today when one ought to know that an equivalent deployment of a woman could free up a man for the war.” Troost did not reply further. Although in the 1970s, as noted earlier, Troost was willing to concede the difficulties professional women had faced in Hitler’s Männerstaat, during the Third Reich she firmly denied it.140

Today, Troost rarely appears in histories of the Third Reich. Scholars and journalists who interviewed her while she was alive were usually more interested in her husband, Speer, or Hitler than in her own life and work. Unlike Leni Riefenstahl, who in 1940 had invited Troost to visit her on the set of The Lowlands (Tiefland), Troost did not court press attention. With time, most Germans forgot about the woman in white who had appeared time and again by Hitler’s side. When she died on January 30, 2003, her passing went unremarked by the mainstream German media. Instead, her obituary appeared on the right-wing news portal Altermedia Germany, a website popular with German neo-Nazis. It ended with the statement, “Gerdy Troost remained true to her convictions to her death. We bid farewell to an upstanding German and a worthy artist.” The obituary was then reposted with an English translation on Stormfront.com, the white-supremacist online forum.141

Nor was Troost forgotten by Third Reich memorabilia collectors, who avidly pursue her work. Her military certificates fetch substantially higher prices than the decorations themselves.142 And despite her reticence about appearing in the public spotlight, Troost clearly wanted to be remembered. Starting in the 1980s, Troost enabled the Bavarian State Library to assemble a vast archival collection documenting the life and work of her husband as well as the activities of the Atelier Troost. The library also acquired Gerdy Troost’s postwar professional records and her personal papers, including over seventy years of her correspondence. Some of these materials remain sealed for a period of fifteen years after Troost’s death. When the full collection opens officially in early 2019, it will keep historians busy for years to come.